

Sealed for Salvation

MJCF

August 9, 2020

Revelation 7:1-17

Are you saved? Many Christians, when they think of evangelism, have an image of people asking, “Are you saved?” To, become a Christian does have the meaning of being “saved,” but, many people will wonder, “...saved from what?!” And, the answer is that we are saved from sin (that thing deep inside us that makes us self-centred, causing us to miss God’s perfect way). It’s true that because God’s Son, Jesus died on the cross for us, our sin has been “wiped clean.” If we admit our sin, and turn back to God, we can be at peace, living in a close relationship with our loving God, destined for heaven as forgiven sinners... But, there is much more to being saved than having our sin “wiped clean.” It includes “rebirth,” a transformation of our lives, it includes reconciliation, and relationships restored. When we make the decision to believe in Jesus Christ, and follow him as our Lord, and Saviour, we are baptised and become members of his church. We then belong to a community of believers that models different values than our surrounding society. Instead of competition, violence, and revenge, we strive to follow Christ’s way of cooperation, forgiveness, and love; even love of our enemies. This is only possible with Christ working in our hearts, giving us the strength and courage to live a new way. This new way causes tension throughout the world. Christians are even killed for what they believe. Jesus was hung on the cross because the people just couldn’t handle his challenges to their worldly systems and values, which were different from the ways of God.

A key theme in the book of Revelation has to do with the contrast between God’s way, shown in the image of Jesus Christ as a slaughtered lamb, and the ways of the world shown through images of violence. The way of Christ is one of sacrificial love, while the way of the world is one of force and destruction. In contrast to the world’s ways of strength through force, the book of Revelation shows a different way of salvation. As members of God’s community, through Jesus, we are saved, not to avoid any suffering, but to have hope, and strength to go through suffering and even death, because death is not the end.

Chapter seven of Revelation comes after six seals of a scroll have been opened. They reveal God’s plans for history, and the reality of war, death, and destruction. Much of this reflects the realities that many experience in the world right now. A key point, though, is that God is still in control, and is limiting the hardships. Yet, with all the terrible suffering that is revealed, we are left with the words, “Who is able to stand?” Now, before the seventh seal is opened, we have the answer. There are a great many people that are able to “stand.” Let’s look more closely at the many symbols here.

Like the four horsemen of chapter six, we have four angels holding back the wind. They likely represented the four points of a compass, North, South, East, and West, meaning everywhere. Wind was seen as a destructive force like we see in a typhoon. With the angels holding back the wind, we see that the destructive powers of the tribulation are in the hands of God. God is in control. The destruction is held back until God’s people are “sealed” or marked in some way. In Hebrew tradition, before the great flood that destroyed everything on earth, the angels held back the water until Noah could build an ark. God cares for us. God will not let any difficulty or challenge come into our lives without giving us the strength to endure. The problem may not go away, but we can be confident that God walks with us within the challenges, as we pray and put our trust in Jesus.

Revelation describes times of tribulation and suffering, but here we see hope. We read of an angel, “ascending from the rising of the sun...” The sun rises in the east, and traditionally the east has symbolised hope. East was the location of the garden of Eden/paradise; in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision, God’s glory came into the temple through the east gate; the long-awaited Saviour was expected to come from the east; and when Jesus was born, a special star was seen in the east. This angel give a command to the four angels to not release the winds of destruction until God’s servants are sealed with a special mark. This mark could have three possible meanings. One, it could represent something being authentic and true, such as when a king seals a letter with the mark of his ring – or like a

Japanese name stamp. Two, it could represent ownership, such as when a slave would receive a mark on the neck or wrist to show to whom they belonged. Here, the sealed believers belong to Jesus Christ. Third, and most likely though, the seal means protection, such as in the story of Cain and Able, where Cain receives a mark from God to protect him from being killed. Another example of a mark being used as a symbol of protection would be during the plague against all the first-born in Egypt. At God's command, the Israelites put lamb's blood on their doorposts, and they were saved from destruction.

A key point to note here, is that it does not say anywhere that God's people won't face the hardships. Nowhere does it say that they are taken up to heaven before experiencing the tribulations. Instead, they are marked with a seal, meaning they are loyal to Jesus Christ, that he will be with them in suffering, and they will have a place in heaven with God, after the suffering.

We read about two large groups of people – the 144,000, and a great multitude that no one can count. These are the faithful people who are sealed or marked by Christ. They are the ones belonging to God's kingdom. They are the ones who are “saved.” Let's look at the 144,000. I'll get into some of the possible meanings of this group, but in fact, the 144,000 in verse four, and the great multitude in verse nine are two perspectives of the same group of people. The 144,000 represent the people of God/the church about to face persecution on earth, while the great multitude represents the people of God in heaven after they've gone through “the great ordeal” (v.14) of persecution.

Here are some ways people have interpreted the 144,000.

1. Some think that they are martyrs who get protection to share about Christ. But, according to what is written, they not called martyrs and they are sealed before they face the tribulations.
2. Some believe that Christians are “raptured” or taken to heaven, and the 144,000 are Jews who become Christians during the suffering. This is often called a “Dispensationalist” view. But, the biblical text does not say anything about the faithful people being taken to heaven to avoid suffering. And, in the end, those who are part of heaven are “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages...” not just Jews. One more huge point is that, ten of the tribes of Israel actually did not even exist when Revelation was written! Hundereds of years earlier they had been conquered by Assyria and scattered.
3. Most likely, the 144,000 is a symbol of the Christian church, which would include roots in the Jewish 12 tribes, and Jesus' 12 Apostles. Add together the 12 lists of 12 and you get 144. In Hebrew tradition, the number 1,000 means a large quantity. So, 144 thousand would represent the entire people of God. If we look at this list of the tribes of Israel, it is symbolic. It's different than many other places in the Bible where the tribes are listed. Dan is missing, and Levi and Joseph are included, which is unusual. The tribe of Dan was known to be especially unfaithful, and strong in idol worship. Some had believed the “antichrist” or the powerful leader who would oppose Jesus would come from the tribe of Dan... Jesus, the Saviour was born as a descendant of Judah. So, this may be one reason why Judah comes first in the list, and Dan is left out. The 144,000 represents the faithful followers of Jesus about to face suffering.

The vision of a “great multitude that no one could count” is an image of people who have been through suffering and are now in heaven. They wear white robes, and have palm branches in their hands, symbols of victory and thanksgiving. The scene is one of joy and heavenly worship. In verse 12, they sing seven exclamations representing God, “... Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! ...” Seven symbolizes the completeness, perfection, and divinity of God. Adding an “Amen!” both before and after this gives it greater emphasis.

An elder explains that the people robed in white “have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” What an image! At that time red was considered the opposite colour to white, and an evil life was symbolised by filthy clothes, while a pure and good life was symbolised by clean clothes. Therefore, through the blood of Jesus, we are washed and made clean. It’s an image of receiving victory through suffering. It’s not by avoiding suffering that we are saved. We are already saved through Jesus who suffered for us. This understanding of God’s way gives us strength and hope, especially when we suffer. If we accept the mark of Christ in our hearts, we can rest assured that no matter what challenges we face in this life, we have an unlimited source of strength to make it through. And, we know we’ll someday be together with God where there will no longer be suffering, and “God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes.” Let’s pray.

Loving God, You reign over all. Your kingdom is secure, and there is nothing outside of your control. Yet, we struggle with difficulties and challenges in our lives, and wonder why. With so much suffering in the world, we long to see you make things right. Thank-you that when we do face difficulties, you are with us, and you place limits any hardships that come. May we find our strength in you. Help us to not forget that Jesus has already gone through suffering and won the final battle with evil, on the cross. We desire to trust in you. When facing challenges, help us to hold on to your way of love. May we live as your people, sharing your love in a world of darkness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.